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Miller, Building Poe Biography

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John Carl Miller. *Building Poe Biography*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State U. Press, 1977. xix + 269pp. \$20.00.

This book, the first of four projected volumes, ensconces the name of John Miller among other modern scholars who have contributed invaluable to Poe studies: Killis Campbell, Thomas Ollive Mabbott, Arthur Hobson Quinn, and Floyd Stovall. Like them Miller gives much that is new; in turn he alters, at times shatters, much that is old, as he serves us quantities of documents assembled by John Henry Ingram for a "definitive" life of Poe. In this respect Miller resembles his subject, although with none of Ingram's envy of and acrimony toward others working on Poe's biography. An Englishman, Ingram caused Americans shame for so long neglecting one of their foremost literary artists, and, worse yet, for allowing a veil of calumnies and villifications so to enshroud Poe the man and writer as to recall the accomplished "masonry" of his own fiendish Montresor. As that worthy entombed Fortunato, so R. W. Griswold interred Poe beneath considerable biographical distortion and degradation. Not that Poe had furthered his own cause much. With his flair for romance and sensationalizing he contributed mightily to establishing the "Poe legend," with hints of a novel patterned after Sue's, travel and adventures in Russia and Greece, and the ministrations of a luscious woman while ill in foreign climes. Small wonder, as Mrs. Clemm wrote to Neilson Poe (p. 50), that "Eddie used to laugh heartily when he would hear it, but did not think it worth the trouble of contradiction." If such a person as Griswold believed rumors about Poe's foreign travel, 'twas perhaps "Eddie's" own fault. He had circulated that story in that portrait purported to be the work of Henry B. Hirst, but substantially, if not wholly, composed (and not over modestly) by the young writer himself.

Now, long afterward, Miller puts together in handy form materials for the future biographer of Poe, with guidelines — couched in his superb, if self-effacing authority in matters Poesque — to distinguish the reliable from the otherwise. This is scholarship of a fascinating, captivating variety, recalling another book that continues to attract and inform readers, though written long ago, John Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu*.

Miller's eight chapters contain information, mainly unpublished,

in the form of letters by Maria Clemm, Rosalie Poe, William Hand Browne, Marie Louise Shew Houghton, Annie Richmond, and George W. Eveleth that assisted Ingram's campaign against the Griswold portrait of Poe. The good index, and, even more, the appendices aid the reader of *Building Poe Biography*. The first appendix supplies thumbnail sketches of "Names, topics, newsclippings, and letters frequently mentioned in the text." These items are asterisked within the text itself for convenient cross-reference. Two bibliographies furnish a chronological list of Ingram's works, the first itemizing those on Poe, the next citing other subjects.

Mrs. Clemm, Ingram himself, and W. F. Gill are held up for particular judgment in these pages, and, we only too readily discern, all deserve whipping. Poe scholarship has enjoyed associations with cranks and crankiness, and both exist among these three personages (not to forget about the others, in whom either individual or cross-line quirks were evident, witness the rift between Mrs. Whitman and Mrs. Richmond upon the publication of Ingram's essay printing Poe's letters to the latter). Miller's clarity is laudable. Although he pretty much lets his dramatis personae speak for themselves, his terse, pithy remarks interspersed among the primary documents treat what is accurate, what inaccurate, and what indeterminable, and often save his subjects from themselves, so to speak. Mrs. Lewis's letters to Eveleth, revealing that she, and not Mrs. Clemm alone, pressed Griswold into "doing" Poe modifies a bit of flummery current for more than a century. Miller reveals how human, if not always humane, impulses have shaped the image of Poe that prevails in the mountain of biographical assays (or forays) upon a knotty subject. That among devotees Poe the man dominates Poe the artist, his personal hopes to the contrary, is clearer now because of Miller's work. Letters, portraits, editing, fact-gathering (along with much time-becobwebbed reminiscence), and gush hold the stage onto which Miller sends out of the wings characters to speak their lines before us. John Henry Ingram, the hero, ironically resembles Griswold in rearranging and distorting Poe's character, although the Englishman's obfuscations, instead of scarifying, went toward whitewashing *his* Edgar Allan Poe. Like Griswold, too, Ingram engendered great animosities, even if his battles resulted not so much because he tampered with factuality, which he did, but from his pugnacity toward anyone else whom he considered a poacher upon his private preserves as Poe's "definitive"

biographer. Miller, as I stated above, provides us with a readable scholarly book.

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